

Thanks A Lot!
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Thanks a lot!

What was I thinking with that enthusiastic, casual sermon title?

Thanks a lot!

Or worse yet, that snarky, ironic sermon title?

Four days from now folks will be gathering in homes across the country for the feast that is for many the quintessential American holiday. National rather religious in nature, uniquely ours, observed by all Americans, often proclaimed “my favorite holiday” by those weary of the greed and consumerism of the December holiday soon to follow.

I must acknowledge that Thanksgiving has been tarnished in recent years as European Americans have come to realize and/or admit that Native Americans have good reasons to feel differently about the occasion it commemorates. And we educated and enlightened Unitarian Universalists know that those traits of the holiday I just mentioned overlook some other important historical facts and cultural realities as well. Our Thanksgiving is a civic holiday, celebrated by our nation more or less as a whole, rather than by one single religious tradition or another, true, but the impulse toward gratitude is deeply religious, and the call to offer thanks is an imperative common to most religious traditions. Beyond that, the United States is by no means alone among the countries of the world celebrating annual harvest festivals or other celebrations of gratitude and thanksgiving—most a mix of ethnic, religious, cultural and national traditions. And on this continent alone there were in fact several first thanksgivings, besides the one in Plymouth Colony we learned about in elementary school, the one many endeavor to emulate in our family celebrations. We know all this, and armed with such knowledge, if we really wanted to we could add Thanksgiving to the list of myths unmasked, superstitions proven false, primitive traditions outdated and quaint when viewed by the light of modern sensibilities. And as such either abandon the holiday altogether, or give it over to over indulgence and football. But we would do so at our own peril.

I’m not arguing for keeping ourselves in the dark about the facts. It’s good to have a broad understanding of the role of thanksgiving in a variety of religious and cultural traditions. It is important to know the ugly, brutal truths about the relationships between European settlers to this land and the people they found already living here. To know, for example, that one of the motives behind that first Plymouth Colony feast was to demonstrate to the Wampanoag the strength of the colonists’ arms—an early precursor to today’s Thanksgiving Day parades. It’s also important to take a thoughtful look at the myth itself.

It’s revealing to examine what it is our forbears thought not only suitable but also important enough to promote as the primary act and purpose of a national holiday. At Sarah Hale’s urging and by President Lincoln’s proclamation, they chose thanksgiving. In doing so they echoed the settlers at Plymouth Colony, who at their very first thanksgiving—the one before the First with a capital F—were grateful for nothing any nobler or less grand than survival. Not wealth or stately new homes. Not career advancement or root cellars filled with preserves. Not conquest of a

wilderness or establishment of a government. Only the most basic and most wondrous thing of all—life itself.

Governor Bradford's official proclamation, three years after arrival, would mention an abundant harvest, freedom of worship, good health—circumstances worthy of thanksgiving. President Lincoln's proclamation likewise catalogs abundant blessings due the giving of thanks: farming, manufacturing, mining, and even rule of law and good foreign relationship. Yet our knowledge of historical settings of both that 'first' Thanksgiving proclamation and that first presidential Thanksgiving proclamation conveys the message that neither was issued at what could be described as a time of peace, prosperity or easy-living.

It is good to be reminded that even when our crop prices fall, when we lose a promotion or fail to find a job, when relationships end and diagnosis are frightening, when tenure is denied, when loved ones die, when our service members continue to fight, become wounded, and die in an all but forgotten war, and a thousand disappointments seem to shape our lives, even then, even now we have countless blessings for which to be grateful.

Winning the mega-millions Powerball, getting a shiny new truck, graduating with honors, or winning awards are all great, but the sun setting over fields, the moon rising through trees, autumn winds and spring rains, the warm, soft weight of a sleeping child are true blessings we have not earned and can neither buy nor bank. Fame and fortune are the dreams of childhood. Steadfast friends and loving family, civic engagement and satisfying work are the blessings of adulthood. Looking back upon decades of partnership and friendships, resting from the labors of a lifetime, watching the new generations thrive because of us and despite us, these are among the blessings of old age.

Urban and suburban dwellers here in the US live far removed from agricultural cycles of sowing, tending, harvesting, and even we here in farm country get much of our food from far afield, purchasing it in stores, some of it processed and packaged. Abundance in a variety and at a scale unimaginable just fifty years ago characterizes many tables all the year through, but contemporary Americans, no less than those mythologized Pilgrims can give thanks that every meal we eat keeps hunger at bay, sends life flowing through our bodies. We no less than they have cause to celebrate with prayer, with feast or fasting, survival and community. To offer thanks, yet one more time that Life has brought us safely to this day, together.

Hard, hard it is, this anxious autumn,

To lift the heavy mind from its dark forebodings;

To sit at the bright feast, and with ruddy cheer

Give thanks for the harvest of a troubled year.

...

From the apprehensive present, from a future packed

With unknown dangers, monstrous, terrible and new—

Let us turn for comfort to this simple fact:

We have been in trouble before . . . and we came through.

Hard years seem to keep piling up, and Thanksgiving after Thanksgiving I keep turning to Millay's poem for the companionship of the opening stanza and the promised comfort of those final lines. I hold them close to soothe myself, and I offer them to you to say: we came through trouble before by recognizing that even when day after day draws forth a muttered and snarky "thanks a lot" for so much that befalls us, surely there are those things that nevertheless deserves an unrestrained "thanks a lot!" What are they for you this year, today, this hour?

May each answer draw forth another answer, each blessing prompt a further thanksgiving, until at last, for you and me and everyone we love, our horns of plenty spill out and along the table and onto the floor. And we come through. Amen.

Responsive Reading

In celebrating the bounty of the year,

It is right and good to give thanks.

A lot of farmers, farm workers, truck drivers, grocers fill our cupboards and refrigerators,

So we say thanks.

A lot of parents, grandparents, home economists taught us to cook and preserve, budget and shop, feed ourselves and others,

To them we say thanks.

A lot of beauty meets eye and ear: fields now harvested, bare trees against broad skies, tracks of unseen creatures, gestures of kindness and welcome and justice, wind-song and bird-song and songs of humanity,

For by thus our mundane days become sacred, we utter wondering thanks.

A lot of people, neighborhoods, organizations, and events move together in a great unseen pattern, creating, shaping, refining the life we call our own,

For each of these and for this life, our hearts re-echo thanks.

A lot of nurses and physicians, therapists and pharmacists, aides and technicians preserve and restore our health when we cannot do it alone,

And when we remember to, we say thanks.

A lot of days worries nag and fear rises. Remembering it has not always been so and believing it will not always be so,

Even then, it is right to offer thanks.

A lot we don't understand, a lot we must take on faith, a lot we must turn over to the care of others and the Other. Knowing this is so and accepting that is are not the same gesture.

For the blessings that appear when we let go anyway, in surprise we sputter thanks.

A lot of days wonder wells within us, that we awoke, that a roof shelters us, that love surrounds us,

So easily then, we say thanks and thanks and thanks.

A lot.

Amen.